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New Jersey
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LETTER

ON THE

PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

OF

NEW JERSEY,

BY

LUCIUS Q. C. ELMER.

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*university
incriminatus*



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TO THE GOVERNOR OF NEW JERSEY.

I have seen with much satisfaction, the sentiments recently expressed, in your inaugural address, on the subject of education. The great importance of general education, in a republic like ours, is acknowledged by all; and I think it is one of the most encouraging circumstances attending our general progress, that every year witnesses new efforts to extend its blessings and to perfect a system of public schools, free to all, and worthy the support of all. The experience of two centuries on this continent, seems to have confirmed the experience of many centuries in the old world, that the private efforts of the citizen cannot be safely relied on, to provide a competent education for all the children in any community. Upon this point, there is a general concurrence of opinion. But whether the government ought to undertake this duty, or to what extent it may safely and advantageously interfere, are questions of great moment upon which there is a great diversity of sentiment.

You are aware that a large and influential denomination of christians; or to speak more accurately, the ecclesiastical head of that denomination; (and this I hope, is not a distinction without a difference,) has come out in decided reprobation of the whole system of public schools, and commenced an effort to substitute, at least for the children under their influence, denominational or parochial schools, "in which the usual branches of a sound elementary education are taught; with the addition of daily religious instruction from the bible, under the superintendence of a christian teacher." And those who have promoted this movement declare, that there is a "growing

dissatisfaction of christians in all parts of the country, with the whole plan of political supervision ; and that a general system of education that shall be a christian system, appears to be a state impracticability."

These are certainly startling declarations. I suppose we are agreed in the opinion, that any system of education of which religious truth and duty do not constitute an essential and prominent feature, is of very doubtful utility, if not positively pernicious. If our citizens of good morals and true piety, or even a considerable proportion of such, must feel constrained by a paramount duty, to withdraw from the direction of our public schools, there will be great danger that they will prove a curse rather than a blessing. Being myself, at this time, one of the directors of a public school, established under the laws of this state, where an attempt is making, under most promising auspices, to teach the usual branches of a sound elementary education, with the addition of daily religious instruction from the bible, under the superintendence of christian teachers ; and which is not only free to all denominations and descriptions of children of a suitable age, but the advantages of which are eagerly sought by all, from the children of our wealthiest to those of our poorest citizens ; I have felt constrained to inquire, whether I am really in the path of duty, and whether there is any serious danger that the hopes of good from this and similar schools must be wholly abandoned. I am happy to be able to say, that I am persuaded, there is no real incompatibility between a system of state schools, and the general introduction of sound religious instruction.

To the system of denominational or parochial schools, it seems to me, that there are most serious, if not insuperable objections. This is not perhaps a suitable occasion, and I do not therefore propose to enter fully into an exposition of them. I may be permitted, however, with most sincere respect for those who differ from me, to remark that its obvious tendency is, greatly to increase that most lamentable disposition, no where more prevalent than in our own country, to sectarian divisions. If it be the duty of christians, as surely it is, "to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace ;" shall they begin this work by carefully separating their children, through all the stages of their growth, from all who do not belong to the same communion or frequent the same church ? If it be now

true, as most unfortunately it is, that a vicious sentiment prevails, so that "schism becomes the condition of enjoying our own opinions; and a peculiar opinion on almost any religious subject, is deemed more important than christian union and incompatible with it;" what more calculated to foster and increase this sentiment, than to contract the instinctive sympathies of youth, into the exclusive circle of one denomination? And what is to become of that large portion of our children, who upon this plan cannot be reached at all? What is to become of all those sections of our wide spread country, where no christian sect has strength enough to maintain a separate school? What is to become of those state funds, and state systems, which have been so long in forming, through the efforts of patriots and christians, many of whom have gone to their rest? Are they to be abandoned to those who have no christian principles, and therefore no christian scruples? Or are these state funds and systems, to be broken up and scattered, and all that has been gained, in many cases by long continued effort, totally lost? Or ought even one denomination of christians, numbering among its members so many persons eminently qualified for directors and teachers and patrons of our public schools, isolate themselves from the great body of their fellow men, and direct all their efforts to the building up of a new and untried scheme? I find it impossible myself to give a satisfactory answer to these questions, and must therefore respectfully submit them, to those they more particularly concern.

That the task of so adjusting a system of schools, established by authority of law, and supported by taxation, as to afford sound religious instruction, without interfering with the conscientious scruples, or at least the deep rooted prejudices, of the many sects prevailing among us, is exceedingly difficult, may be readily admitted. It is also true, that the disposition to get rid of these difficulties, by excluding religious instruction altogether, combined with the hostility of some to religion itself, has manifested itself so strongly on many occasions, as to account for, and perhaps to excuse, the effort to adopt another plan. But the true question is, can more good be accomplished by adhering to the system of public schools, the benefits of which have been found to be so great, than by abandoning it? After all, if this great question is looked at in all its aspects, cannot christians succeed in imparting religious instruction to vastly more of our

youth, through the means of public schools, than by any other plan yet tried or suggested? My firm conviction is that they may, and that their united efforts ought to be directed to this object.

How far the state should go, in the establishment and control of public schools, is a question of great importance, which does not appear to have received the attention it deserves. By many it has been taken for granted, that the government should not only contribute funds and afford the aid of its laws and taxes; but that it should regulate the kind of instruction to be given, either by direct rules prescribed by law, or through the intervention of state superintendents, state boards or state libraries. The attempt to do this, although productive of good in many respects, is liable to so great abuse, that I think it ought to be entirely abandoned.

It has happily become an axiom, in this country, in regard to which there is almost entire unanimity, that religion needs no direct aid from the state. Its divine author has provided a safer and better mode of teaching it, by means of voluntary societies, dependent alone on his authority and aid. Were these societies also designed for, and fully competent to the task, of imparting to the young a competent knowledge of letters and science, as well as of christian faith and duty, it would be safe to leave that task solely to them. But this is not alleged; and experience has proved the contrary. Indeed it admits of great question whether the attempt to do it, even in an indirect and circuitous manner, is not a departure from their appropriate sphere. The direct and sole object of the churches, is to teach religion. The direct object of schools is to teach letters and science. Religion, although an important and in my opinion essential part of what they ought to teach, is so only incidentally and because even the common branches of learning cannot be well taught, disunited from religion. Our churches need no government aid, because they succeed best without it. On the contrary schools, for the benefit of all, succeed best with such aid. Hitherto in the history of the world, no other plan has succeeded in imparting education so generally, as the schools in America, aided by state funds and supported in whole or in part, by public taxation.

But because it is conceded that the state ought to establish and support schools, and that these schools ought to teach religious duties in conjunction with letters and science, it by no means follows, that

the state ought to prescribe the mode in which this duty shall be performed. The attempt to do it, either directly or indirectly, is in my opinion, to be greatly deprecated. Let this duty be left in the hands of the teachers and of those who employ them. They can perform it, with the best hope of doing it, in the main, well. All that is needful, is to leave them full liberty to do as their consciences dictate. For the reasons I have assigned, the state ought to do more for the schools, than it is its province to do for the churches ; but this difference ought not to go beyond the necessity of the case. The state always has been, and it is to be feared always will be, a bad teacher of religion ; and there is reason to doubt whether its capacity to teach letters and science is any better.

Probably few will be found to insist, under existing circumstances, that the state should be called on to prescribe any particular course of religious instruction. The great difficulty of doing this, without interfering with the conscientious scruples of many worthy citizens, would probably prevent the attempt, even if there was no other hindrance. Very many, however, seem to think, that to protect these scruples, the government should go to the other extreme, and absolutely prohibit religious instruction, in the public schools, of any kind. These persons forget that this will not less interfere with the consciences of those who believe that moral, should always accompany intellectual, culture, and that the bible contains the only true standard of morals. They forget too, that those of this belief, comprise the great body of the community. Although our constitution very properly declares that there shall be no establishment of one religious sect, in preference to another, that no religious test shall be required, and that no person shall be denied the enjoyment of any civil right merely on account of his religious principles ; yet it does by no means proscribe religion. On the contrary it expressly recognizes a God and our accountability to him. Our laws all imply the same thing, and that the christian religion, is the religion of most of the people. Upon this principle, the public business, as a general rule, ceases on Sunday ; and our legislative bodies invite christian ministers to pray for a divine blessing on their labours. No direct provision has been made I believe, for imparting religious instruction to the prisoners in the penitentiary, or to the lunatics in the asylum, but the managers of these institutions are left at liberty to permit it to be

done ; and in practice it is done to some extent. As these are necessarily state institutions, confined to one locality, I see no reason why such religious instruction should not be specifically provided, as shall accord with the opinions of the majority ; but the same reason does not apply to schools.

As our laws now are, the inhabitants of the different school districts in the state, have full liberty, through the trustees they choose, to regulate the public schools as they deem best ; except the restriction contained in the eighth section of the school law, which requires teachers to be licensed in the manner there prescribed, a restriction by the way, of very doubtful utility. Happily the authority to license is vested in no state superintendent or state board, but in officers appointed by the several counties and townships. This freedom from control by a central power of any kind, whatever advantages such control may seem to promise, I trust will be most scrupulously maintained. The main object of the liberty I have taken in addressing to you this letter, is to insist upon this. Let christians of all denominations heartily unite in the great work, of imparting to our youth christian instruction in our public schools, and let this great principle of leaving every district to perfect freedom, be steadily maintained, and I do not fear the result. It is all the freedom the case admits, and all it requires. Each district will thus be left, as in New Jersey it now is left, to be governed by the majority, and these districts may be of greater or less dimensions as circumstances require. In some cases probably, the majority will discard religious instruction altogether ; and in some what is taught will be grossly erroneous. But so it will be, on any plan that can be devised ; and in my opinion there will be far more erroneous teaching, and what is nearly equivalent, far more of no teaching at all, if public schools be wholly discarded. It will no doubt happen in some cases, that individuals will even be compelled to contribute to the support of schools, they cannot with a good conscience, allow their children to enter. But these cases will be few, and for the most part will admit of remedy, by special provisions. Such or similar difficulties beset every system of government. Taxes are constantly raised and applied by government to objects to which some of those who contribute, are most conscientiously opposed. Difficulties of many kinds, there will be ; but such difficulties as need only prudent forbearance and the co-opera-

tion of all the wise and good among our different sects to be generally overcome. Happily there is common ground, upon which the great majority, however they may differ on minor points, can cordially unite. Mere sectarian dogmas must be discarded, and those great and essential doctrines, which lie at the foundation of all true religion and true morals, so taught as not to come in conflict with the peculiar opinions of any of the sects which comprise the large majority of our community. Such doctrines, so taught, almost always commend themselves, even to those who profess no religion, and who by indiscreet measures, are often brought into open hostility to it. The small minority who cannot thus be satisfied, must be left free to promote their peculiar views in their own way, wherever they are found in sufficient numbers to make it practicable. This is their right ; and if it were not, such conciliation would be far preferable to any attempt at coercion. No alteration of our laws, that shall materially abridge, or even seem to abridge, the freedom now enjoyed, ought, in my opinion, to prevail. If the state authorities could always be relied on, as themselves imbued with sound religious principles, I should deem this by far the wisest course. But unhappily this is not the case ; so that the importance of it is greatly enhanced. If there must be the control of a central power over our schools, let it not be a power in danger of being influenced far more by considerations of a political nature, than by such as are truly religious.

Whether a Normal school for the education of teachers, can be safely established by the state, without endangering the principles I deem so important, I will not undertake to decide. The testimony is very strong, that such schools have been eminently useful in other states, and it may be so here.

There is one restriction in our general school law, I have always deemed a fatal obstacle to its success. I allude to that strange provision, which prohibits the inhabitants of a township from raising for schools by a tax, more than double the amount apportioned to it from the state fund. Without a special exemption from it, the school established here could never have been commenced. Upon what principle it is, that money to any amount may be raised and wasted on the highways, while the right to raise it for so important a purpose as the maintenance of good schools is so narrowly restricted, it is difficult to imagine. This restriction leads many to desire a great

increase of the state school fund. My opinion is, that the school fund is now large enough; and should the time come, as it may, when the state may increase it by means of the railroad and canal they will have a right to purchase at cost, so as to enlarge it ten fold, I trust the temptation will be resisted. There is no principle of our nature more deeply rooted, than that what costs but little, is esteemed but little. Let our citizens feel that they pay for their schools, and they will value their blessings more highly and guard their interests more carefully. Such an amount of direct taxation as will provide a good elementary education for every child in the state, will not be felt as a burden.

Very respectfully, your fellow citizen,

LUCIUS Q. C. ELMER.

BRIDGETON, February 1, 1848.

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